

Free to Universalize or Bound by Culture?

Multicultural and Public Philosophy: A White Paper

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“There is no doubt that the war of the worlds is taking place; unity and multiplicity cannot be achieved unless they are progressively pieced together by delicate negotiations. Nobody can constitute the unity of the world for anybody else, as used to be the case (in the times of modernism and later post-modernism), that is, by generously offering to let the others in, on condition that they leave at the door all that is dear to them: their gods, their souls, their objects, their times and their spaces, in short, their ontology.” (Latour 2002, 30)

Multiculturalism requires sustained and serious philosophical reflection, which in turn requires public outreach and communication. This piece briefly outlines concerns raised by the philosophy of multiculturalism and, conversely, multiculturalism in philosophy, which ultimately force us to reconsider the philosopher’s own role and responsibility. I conclude with a provocative suggestion of philosophy as *public diplomacy*. (As this is intended to be a piece for a general audience, secondary literature is only referred to in the conclusion. References gladly provided upon request.)

Multiculturalism is of increasing impact as the flow of people (e.g., migration) and information (e.g., the Internet) continues to accelerate. We find ourselves exposed to an ever-broader variety of opinions, languages, behaviors, and attire in our daily routines. Some of us seem impervious to this diversity. Others find core identities challenged, and may even react with anger, fear or violence. Yet others experience multiculturalism as a source of exhilaration, as a testament to life’s endless and beautiful variety. To complicate things, these feelings and behaviors may also be inextricably mixed within the same person or group. Here I set aside the direct phenomenology of sentiments in favor of metacognitive reflection on individual and social reactions to the fact of increased multiculturalism.

First, let us consider the philosophy of multiculturalism. Second, let us turn to the feedback effects of multiculturalism on philosophy.

Philosophy is a set of tools that allow us to think critically about thinking. These tools can be brought to bear on a number of questions raised by multiculturalism. Why are certain culturally conditioned opinions justified, while others are merely biased and “subjective”? Which sorts of assumptions must be made for a social, judicial or political structure to be considered an appropriate one? How do we adjudicate cultural disagreements about knowledge and science, about the very fabric of concepts and ideas, and about nature? How do we (and could we and should we) arbitrate competing claims to religious truth, or conflicting moral injunctions? Philosophy provides ways of interpreting and addressing these cognitive, linguistic, social, political, and normative complexities. Consider the following questions regarding the impact of philosophy on multiculturalism:

1. How can Kantian, Feminist, Marxist, Philosophical Anthropological, Psychoanalytic, Analytical Metaethical, and Existentialist *philosophical frameworks* (among others) provide explanations and interpretations of, and recommendations for, *multicultural realities* such as blasphemy laws, calls to prayers, “group rights,” treatment of women in different cultural groups, and territorial rights of indigenous first nations? How can a single philosophical framework assist in making explicit the assumptions, concepts, and power involved in social and political matters?
2. How can philosophical investigation (in general or through a particular school of thought, or both) provide a glimpse into the way *language* is used in the construction of social (and natural?) worlds? How do humans, in general and in specific cultures, use metaphor, concepts, and classifications to build and justify social reality? Which effects does mistranslation and poor translation have in inter-cultural communication? How does language affect thought and society?
3. How can philosophical reflection shed light on how *the mind* itself (e.g., rationality, actual reasoning, and deep narrative mythological/religious structures) is conditioned by culture? Which sorts of data and theories would be required to show, or at least suggest, that the feelings, inference, memory, perception and so forth are altered by cultural context, and how can philosophy’s meta-scientific reflection help us evaluate the relevance and weight of such data and theories?
4. How can philosophical analysis provide insight into the very existence (possibility?) of *groups*? That is, although it may seem absurd to some, one can ask whether cultural groups even exist. Might there be sufficient intragroup variation, and intergroup similarity, to deflate claims about group identity, or at least to see that such claims might be made primarily for political or economic benefit? Put succinctly, are cultural groups themselves products of exoticization and orientalism, both from “within” and “without”?

In other words, by providing overarching meta-scientific frameworks, different philosophical schools can assist scholarly, activist, and diplomatic (see below) work on (1) social and political questions, (2) language, (3) mind, and (4) cultures. Analytical, clarificatory, and critical philosophical work should be done always in light of social relevance. They should not suffer from the occasional and often well-intentioned excesses of analytical philosophy (e.g., zombies, modal counterparts, and grue). Viewed in this way, philosophy is relevant across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences; indeed, philosophy is (usefully thought of) as a family of dynamic tools, not as a static systemic end in itself.

Let us now consider the converse effect of multiculturalism on philosophy. Is philosophy impervious to social, political, and economic—i.e., cultural—context? Should it be? Academic philosophy is often criticized for inhabiting an Ivory Tower. This is particularly true for the dominant Analytical tradition, which seems to forget that it is, after all, people who are philosophizing. People are embedded in a body and culture, and live in a confused and rich tangle of feelings, desires, and dreams. Multiculturalism reminds us that all of this needs to be taken into account in philosophizing about the human condition. We must get out of the Ivory Tower, and perhaps invite others up into it. Consider the following questions about the ways multiculturalism feeds back on philosophy:

1. How does multiculturalism force the philosopher to consider *cultural context* in her potentially universalizing pronouncements and principles about “the human condition”? How can we

develop a philosophy sensitive both to cultural context and to what might be (and perhaps should be) universal about our condition?

2. How might changes in power and context of the philosophical inquirer *her- or himself* change the questions and answers on the table? How could shifts in the cultural context (e.g., language, norms, political system) of the inquirer change what is at stake, and which tools are used, in on-the-ground philosophical inquiry? How might a multicultural autobiography affect the work of the single philosopher?
3. How does multiculturalism invite philosophy to be a broader cultural enterprise, by engaging in *comparative philosophy*? That is, philosophy itself is perhaps no longer a strictly universalist enterprise, exploring the nature, conditions, and dynamics of knowledge, values, and reality *sub specie aeternitatis* (“under the aspect of eternity”). Rather, Philosophy is carried on in different contexts, and with “cultural qualifiers”: Latin American, Indian, Chinese, Amerindian, Islamic, etc. Multiculturalism suggests that studying the history of Western philosophy is no longer sufficient for contextualizing philosophy. Synchronic (i.e., geographic, cultural) comparison, in addition to diachronic (i.e., historical) comparison are both necessary for a richer understanding of human philosophy and thought.
4. How does multiculturalism invite us to reflect on the direct responsibility philosophy has to *the public*, and on the importance of playing the role of *public intellectual*? Philosophy can (and should) contribute to reflective, nuanced, and informed public discussion of the realities and consequences of multiculturalism. Multicultural realities urge the philosopher to engage in public debate. Or at least, so it seems, and so I hope. Some, if not all, philosophers are affected by “globalization” and multiculturalism. Some are even themselves the direct, autobiographical product of multiculturalism. Again, as multicultural citizens, professional philosophers are reminded of the importance of public outreach.

Thus, philosophy influences thinking and doing about multiculturalism, and vice-versa. Philosophers need to consider cultural context in our philosophical analyses, and be metacognitive about our own biases and presuppositions. Furthermore, increased flow of people and information invites professional philosophers (even at elite American institutions) to engage in comparative philosophy and in public outreach. Again, philosophy can and should do work in the world.

This white paper serves to briefly motivate what is at stake in the philosophy of multiculturalism and multiculturalism of philosophy.

I conclude with an admittedly contentious suggestion for the role of the (multicultural) philosopher as *public diplomat*. In his essay, “Imaginary Homelands,” Rushdie observes:

It may be argued that the past is a country from which we have all emigrated, that its loss is part of our common humanity. Which seems to me self-evidently true; but I suggest that the writer who is out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss in an intensified form. It is made more concrete for him by the physical fact of discontinuity, of his present being in a different place from his past, of his being ‘elsewhere’. This may enable him to speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal. (1992, 12)

I would like to suggest that here we can replace, *mutatis mutandi*, “writer” with “philosopher.” Indeed, alienation from time and country, history and culture, via comparison and reflection, allows us to see

that “potentially every culture as all cultures” (Paul Feyerabend, 1994). The 12th century mystical monk, Hugo of St. Victor suggested that rather than find our homeland sweet (“*patria dulcis est*”), perfect is he to whom the entire world is an exile (“*mundus totus exilium est*”). Rushdie, Feyerabend, and Hugo of St. Victor teach that systemic comparison through exile—metaphorical and literal—allows the philosopher to make presuppositions and purposes explicit. By learning which philosophical tools (e.g., logic, feminist analysis, philosophy of science) are pertinent to which aims, we avoid reifying our philosophical culture, and are then precisely able to “speak properly and concretely on a subject of universal significance and appeal.” Multiculturalism thus shatters monoculture’s arrogance, via estrangement and self-examination. It makes us stronger.

Once we become stronger, what shall we do in a multicultural world? Circumstances (and desire?) urge us, as philosophers, to become public diplomats. Diplomacy is a worthy task for reason (Western or otherwise), as Bruno Latour (2002) convincingly argues. Reason may yet lose in the ongoing “wars of the world” conflict once the dust settles (and when will that be?), but it is only by directly facing the momentous task and violence ahead of us, that *multinaturalism* (many alternative ontologies, multiple philosophies of nature; Viveiros de Castro 2004) as well as *multiculturalism* can be negotiated, and a true peace achieved. The stakes are high. Philosophy is a commendable diplomat in this public endeavor.

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